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ABSTRACT

The present study is a pilot investigation of six alternative urban middle schools for students of color that follow the Nativity model. This model emphasizes small class and school size, extended instruction, and strong relationships with family. The six schools included in the study are found in five different urban locations in the United States. In five of the six schools, students showed improvements in standardized test scores in reading and mathematics that exceeded one grade level per year and high grade 6-to-8 persistence rates. Across all schools, student academic performance was found to be related to principals' perceptions of parents' commitment to their children's education, students' social maturity ratings, ratings of students' leadership, and, to a lesser extent, student academic effort. School data show that student academic performance was related negatively to school size, average class size, and student-teacher ratio and positively to the expenditure for teacher salaries per student. This preliminary research will serve to inform a more extensive investigation of the model to include factors such as the quality of administrative leadership and teaching. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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A National Evaluation of the Success of an Alternative Middle School Model for Urban Children of Color

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Abstract

The present study is a pilot investigation of six alternative urban middle schools for students of color that follow the Nativity model that emphasizes small class and school size, extended instruction, and strong relationships with family. The six schools included in the present study are found in five different urban locations in the U.S. In five of the six schools students showed improvements in standardized test scores in reading and math that exceeded 1 grade level per year and high grade 6-to-8 persistence rates. Across all schools, student academic performance was found to be related to principals' perceptions of parents' commitment to their child's education, students' social maturity ratings, ratings of students' leadership, and, to a lesser extent, student academic effort. School data show that student academic performance was related negatively to school size, average class size, and student-teacher ratio and positively to the expenditure for teacher salaries per student. This preliminary research will serve to inform a more extensive investigation of the model to include factors such as the quality of administrative leadership and teaching.

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 24, 2003

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A National Evaluation of the Success of an Alternative Middle School Model for Urban Children of Color

Having started as a single middle school program for boys of color in New York City in 1971, the Nativity school model has formed the basis for the institution of nearly 50 middle schools across the country. This model calls for small class and school sizes (no more than 25 students in each of the grades), low student-to-faculty ratios, and an intensive academic and co-curricular program that operates on Saturdays and during the summer months as well (Nativity Educational Centers Network, 2003). The present study examines the effectiveness of the Nativity model schools that were in operation prior to 1997 by examining the academic and social progress of those students who were members of the 8th-grade classes of 2000, 2001, and 2002.

The Nativity model calls for an educationally rich program in a supportive environment removed from the threats of violence and drugs experienced by many inner city students. The 10-to-12-hour day and Saturday sessions allow for extra tutoring as well as athletic and cultural experiences for the 55 to 90 students selected into each grade 6-through-8 or 5-through-8 school. (The first of these schools was instituted by the Catholic religious order of Jesuits in a Spanish-speaking area on New York City's lower East Side [Flick, 2000; Turbyville, 1995]). Between 1993 and 2001, 33 middle schools incorporating the Nativity model opened across the United States. Nearly all students who attend a Nativity school qualify for the federal lunch program (Nativity Educational Centers Network, 2003).

The model appears to incorporate findings from the well-known research of Ronald Edmonds (1979) on successful inner-city public schools as well as findings of research on effective middle schools (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson &

Davis, 2000). Urban schools in which students perform on standardized tests at levels above the average for the socio-economic characteristics of its surrounding area are characterized by strong leadership which sets a tone for learning in the school, clearly communicated high expectations for students, a strong reading emphasis, an atmosphere that is orderly and pleasant, task-oriented teachers, outside volunteer aids, frequent monitoring of student progress, and access to resources in the community. These findings have brought hope where other researchers have concluded that schools could not influence academic attainment for children disadvantaged by social class and family dysfunction (Polite, 1992).

An earlier comprehensive study of two Nativity model schools (Fenzel, 1997) conducted two years after they opened in an East Coast city with 20 sixth-grade students each showed that students benefited over the public school programs included in the study in school attendance, school performance, time on task, and exposure to a social environment facilitative of learning and social interaction. Other recent work (Fenzel, 2002; Philliber Research Associates, 2001) has showed that students who have attended two such Nativity school post academic achievement gains greater than those of similar students in other schools.

The objectives of the present study are to extend the research to date to examine the academic and social gains realized by boys and girls in 6 such schools located throughout the United States during the middle school, and into the high school, years and to examine the aspects of the school programs that most contribute to student success. Such a study is needed to examine how well the model works in various urban centers and to ascertain which aspects of the program contribute most to educational success.

Method

Schools and participants. Data on students' middle school and high school standardized test performance, class grades, absentee rates, discipline referrals, social adjustment (social maturity, leadership, peer relations), and types of high school programs attended were solicited from 22 Nativity model middle schools in 15 cities across the United States in June, 2002. School personnel were given a small stipend for completing a 2-page questionnaire on each of the students who entered the school and was targeted to graduate from 8th grade in 2000, 2001, or 2002. In all, data were submitted by 6 schools, representing a total of 294 students from these three graduating classes. The percentage of students at the schools who qualified for free or reduced price lunch ranged from 70% to 95%. Other information on the nature of the student sample is contained in Table 1.

Descriptions of the Schools. School A, located in Manhattan and which enrolls girls only, was founded in 1993 and is staffed by a Catholic religious order of women. School B, which opened in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1997, enrolls male students and is the only school in the sample that is not staffed by a religious order or group. School C, located in Manhattan, was founded in 1971 by the Jesuit order of priests as the first of the Nativity schools for boys of Latino descent.

School D, begun in 1993 in Philadelphia, is a coeducational Jesuit middle school component of a larger parochial school. School E is a Jesuit middle school for boys that opened in Milwaukee, WI in 1993. School F is a middle school for boys as well that the Jesuits opened in Baltimore, MD, in the same year. This school was included in earlier studies of the Nativity model conducted by the author (Fenzel, 1997, 2000).

Materials. Data were collected on forms provided the school (see Appendix A). In a cover letter from the director of the Nativity Educational Centers Network, school principals or heads were asked to complete one sheet for each student who matriculated in the school, keeping the identity of each student confidential. School personnel completed a separate form containing the names and code numbers for each student that was not made available to the investigator. Data used in the present study that were contained on these forms were students' standardized test scores in reading and mathematics, students' report card grades in mathematics, language arts, and science, reports of number of annual absences for each student, and principals' ratings of each student on four characteristics: students' level of academic effort, students' demonstration of leadership, students' level of social maturity, and parents' commitment to their child's education. The ratings were provided on a scale of 1 (*much below average*) to 5 (*much above average*) with a score of 3 indicating an average rating.

Additional data were collected by the nativity Network office in phone surveys with school heads from 11 Nativity schools, including four of the schools that were part of the more recent study, in a separate project conducted in the Summer of 2001. These data included reading and mathematics standardized test score figures for the academic year ending in the spring of 2001 for students in all grades, along with the size of the student body, percentage of students on free or reduced lunch, the number of paid teachers, and full-time teacher salaries. Relationships between standardized test scores and the other variables were examined.

Results

Academic gains. Table 2 (A-F) shows the changes in standardized test score performance in reading and mathematics by students in each of the schools by grade level. Four

of the six schools reported student scores with respect to grade level equivalents (GLEs) and two reported percentile ranks. With respect to the four schools reporting GLEs, three of them reported mean gains in excess of 1 GLE per year. School A, for example showed an average gain in reading of 1.2 GLEs per year over two years for the three graduating classes and an average gain of over 1.5 GLEs in mathematics. The average gains for School C in GLEs was 1.5 years in reading and 1.8 years in math between 5th and 8th grade, with math scores averaging 9.8 GLE or better in 8th grade. The analyses of changes in mean percentile rankings of students in Schools D and E in reading and math showed consistent increases between 6th and 8th grade, indications that the scores are increasing at a rate of more than one grade level per year.

Attendance rates for all six of the schools were quite high (see Table 3). In no case did an attendance rate fall below 91.9% for a given class and a given year, and most attendance rates exceeded 95%. Overall attendance rates exceeded 97%, averaged over all grades for all classes for schools A, C, E, and F.

Persistence rates. Data were also examined to compute persistence rates (percentage of students who entered in either 5th or 6th grade and remained at the school to graduate in 8th grade) of each of the schools. School A reported the highest rates with all 41 girls who enrolled as 5th graders and all 3 who entered as 6th graders graduating. At School D, 97% of the students who were enrolled as 5th graders completed the 8th grade. High 6th-to-8th-grade persistence rates were recorded by Schools E (94%) and F (95%). Lower rates were found at School B, with 67% of those entering as 6th graders and 63% of those entering as 5th graders persisting until graduation, and School C, with a 79% grade 6-to-8 persistence rate.

Correlates of academic success and engagement. To assess characteristics of the students and their families that contribute to student academic success and engagement, a series of zero-order correlations were computed between students' report card grades in three classes (in mathematics, language arts, and science) and four ratings provided by principals, including students' demonstration of leadership, students' level of social maturity, students' level of academic effort, and parents' commitment to their child's education. (Because report card grades are difficult to compare between schools due to the different criteria schools and teachers are likely to use to determine grades, these data were not examined.) The correlation analyses were conducted for all students in the sample, without regard to school attended or graduating class. These results, summarized in Table 4, show the highest correlations between student report card grades and ratings of parents' level of commitment to the education of their children (*r*s between .31 and .32, *p*s < .001, 2-tailed, R^2 = .10). Significant moderate correlations were also found between grades and ratings of demonstrated leadership (*r*s between .24 and .25, *p*s < .001, 2-tailed, R^2 = ..06), as well as between grades and ratings of social maturity (*r*s between .23 and .24, *p*s < .001, 2-tailed, R^2 = .05 to .06). Although significant correlations were found between grades and ratings of academic effort (*r*s = .16, *p*s ≤ .01, 2-tailed, R^2 = .03), these correlations are relatively small. Finally, with respect to relationships between school absences and the four ratings, ratings of parents' commitment had the highest correlations, r = -.27, p<.001, R^2 = .07. Correlations between school absences and the other three ratings, also significant, are found in Table 4.

With respect to predictors of student achievement in standardized tests in mathematics and reading from the 11 Nativity schools contacted during the summer of 20001, student

achievement in math was found to be related significantly, in analyses of zero-order correlation coefficients, to the number of students enrolled in the school, $r(9) = -.96$, $p<.001$, $R^2 = .92$, average class size, $r(9)= -.63$, $p=.040$, $R^2 = .40$, the student-teacher ratio, $r(9)= -.81$, $p=.008$, $R^2 = .66$, and the cost per student for teacher salaries, $r(9)= .60$, $p=.048$, $R^2 = .36$. Reading achievement was found to be related significantly to the number of students enrolled in the school, $r(10) = -.73$, $p=.008$, $R^2 = .53$. Correlations approached significance for the relationship between reading performance and the student-teacher ratio, $r(10)= -.54$, $p=.053$, $R^2 = .29$, and the cost per student for teacher salaries, $r(10)= .54$, $p=.054$, $R^2 = .29$. Neither measure of achievement was related to the percentage of students in the school who qualified for federally funded free or reduced price lunch (a negatively skewed variable).

Discussion

The present study was undertaken to examine the nature of the academic and social gains realized by boys and girls in 6 urban middle schools located throughout the United States that have adopted the Nativity school model of small school and class size and extended instructional and enrichment time and to examine the aspects of the school programs that most contribute to student success. The model was adopted first in the early 1970s in New York City to meet the educational needs of boys of color who experienced economic disadvantage.

Results showed that, for five of the six schools studied, consistent academic gains were made by students with respect to standardized test scores in reading and math, gains of the order that exceeded a mean of 1 GLE per year. These gains and achievement levels attained by students in these five schools exceed those posted by students in urban public and parochial schools that serve students from similar backgrounds, as was reported in an earlier study

(Fenzel, 2000). In addition, for all six schools, student attendance rates averaged over 95% for all grades and all graduating classes (with one exception for one class of School D). Grade 6-to-8 persistence rates were also high for the schools with four schools graduating between 94% and 100% of the students who entered as 5th or 6th graders. The school with the lowest grade-6-to-8 persistence rate was the one with the lowest mean performance on standardized tests. This school is also the newest of the schools and is the only one in the study without religious affiliation.

These data provide good support for the effectiveness of the Nativity model in promoting student success, as shown in the increases in standardized test scores. The small size of the schools enables school personnel to get to know all students well and to keep close tabs on student attendance and performance. Data also show that student academic performance is related to the level of parents' commitment to their children's education (as rated by school administrators), as well as to the school's student-teacher ratio and class size. At the school with the poorest academic record and lowest persistence rate, the school administrator rated parents' commitment lower did the administrators at the other five schools. This school, the newest of the schools included in the study, clearly needs to examine the manner in which it approaches the education of its students to see how closely it follows the Nativity model.

Parent involvement, small class size, and low student-to-teacher ratios are among the hallmarks of the Nativity model (Nativity Educational Centers Network, 2003) and, even among the small number of schools included in the present study, all three of these variables showed significant relationships to student academic performance. These factors have been identified by educational reformers as among the principal components of a successful middle

school educational program that meets the growing needs and capabilities of young adolescents (e.g., Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

The present study provides good evidence that the Nativity model contributes much to the academic success of urban boys and girls of color considered at-risk for school failure or dropout. Results of the study also suggest that care must be exercised in implementing the model so that all the components of the model that contribute to student success and persistence are effectively in place. Other important components of successful urban schools include effective leadership from the principal or school head and teachers who are experts in educating young adolescents. The present study was not designed to examine these factors and their relationship with student success.

The present study marks only a beginning of a larger effort being planned for the 2003-2004 school year in which the author will be making visits to a number of Nativity model schools to examine more closely the strengths and weaknesses of the schools in order to be able to identify more clearly components of the model that contribute to student success and development. This future research will examine indicators of student development that include social, emotional, and spiritual growth factors, as well as academic factors. Qualitative and quantitative methods that involve all the stakeholders of the schools will be used to examine these factors.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Nativity Schools and Their Students (Classes of 2000 through 2002)

School Code	Grade Structure	# Students: Male	# Students: Female	Student Ethnicity: Af. Amer.	Latino	Asian	Other
A	5 - 8		44		43		1
B	5 – 8	42		41			1
C	5 – 8	59			55	3	1
D	6 – 8	21	14	35			
E	6 – 8	51			51		
F	6 – 8	63		60	2		1

Table 2A

School A: Mean Grade Level Equivalents for Standardized Testing in Reading and Mathematics for Girls in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8

Class of 2000 [N=14]:

	5th Grade (n=11)	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 5-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	4.6	5.5	6.7	---	2.3*	1.2
Math	4.4	6.3	8.6	---	4.2*	2.1

Class of 2001 [N=15]:

	5th Grade (n=11)	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 5-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	4.4	5.5	6.9	7.7	3.3	1.1
Math	4.9	6.0	8.1	9.0	4.1	1.4

Class of 2002 [N=14]:

	5th Grade (n=11)	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 6-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	4.4	5.7	7.6	8.3	3.9	1.3
Math	5.0	6.6	8.0	8.2	3.2	1.1

Test Administered: Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Note: * Grades 5-7 two-year gain in GLE

Table 2B

School B: Mean Grade Level Equivalents for Standardized Testing in Reading and Mathematics for Boys in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8

Class of 2000 [N=13]:

	5th Grade	6th Grade (n=11)	7th Grade (n=10)	8th Grade (n=9)	Grade 5-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	n/a	6.9	8.2	8.4	1.5*	0.8
Math	n/a	6.9	7.6	8.3	1.4*	0.7

Class of 2001 [N=13]:

	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade (n=9)	8th Grade	Grade 5-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	5.9	5.5	6.0	5.2	-0.7	-0.2
Math	5.0	5.1	6.0	6.5	1.5	0.5

Class of 2002 [N=13]:

	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 6-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	4.2	6.2	5.8	---	1.7**	0.6
Math	4.2	5.6	5.2	---	1.0**	0.3

Test Administered: CTBS

Note: * Grades 6-8 two-year gain in GLE
** Grades 5-7 two-year gain in GLE

Table 2C

School C: Mean Grade Level Equivalents for Standardized Testing in Reading and Mathematics for Boys in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8

Class of 2000 [N=23]:

	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade (n=19)	Grade 6-8 Gain*	Gain per year
Reading	n/a	6.1	7.4	8.2	2.1	1.1
Math	n/a	6.8	8.2	9.9	3.1	1.6

Class of 2001 [N=21]:

	5th Grade (n=9)	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade (n=16)	Grade 6-8 Gain*	Gain per year
Reading	4.0	5.4	7.4	9.2	3.8	1.9
Math	5.0	6.7	7.8	9.8	3.1	1.6

Class of 2002 [N=17]:

	5th Grade (n=13)	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade (n=14)	Grade 6-8 Gain*	Gain per year
Reading	4.8	6.1	8.1	8.8	2.7	1.4
Math	5.9	7.4	8.4	11.7	4.3	2.2

Test Administered: Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Note: * 5th-grade scores were not factored into gains in GLE because of the small number of students in grade 5.

Table 2D

School D: Mean Percentile Scores for Standardized Testing in Reading and Mathematics for Children in Grades 5, 6, 7, and 8

Class of 2000 [N=9]:

	5th Grade (n=6)	6th Grade (n=7)	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 5-8 change	Change per year
Reading	35.3	44.0	39.1	56.8	+21.5	+7.2
Math	68.5	54.4	58.7	56.3	-12.2	-4.1

Class of 2001 [N=14]:

	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 5-8 change	Change per year
Reading	46.6	50.5	65.4	62.9	+16.3	+5.4
Math	51.7	56.3	51.2	64.2	+12.5	+4.2

Class of 2002 [N=11]:

	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 6-8 change	Change per year
Reading	44.5	--	65.3	63.0	+18.5	+6.2
Math	56.1	--	77.8	74.1	+18.0	+6.0

Test Administered: Terra Nova

Table 2E

School E: Mean Percentile Scores for Standardized Testing in Reading and Mathematics for Boys in Grades 6, 7, and 8

Class of 2000 [N=15]:

	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 7-8 change	Change per year
Reading			62.1	n/a	n/a
Math			73.6	n/a	n/a

Class of 2001 [N=15]:

	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 7-8 change	Change per year
Reading		54.5	64.5	+10.0	+10.0
Math		70.8	70.6	- 0.2	-0.2

Class of 2002 [N=15]:

	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 6-8 change	Change per year
Reading	53.4	69.3	65.7	+12.3	+6.2
Math	70.0	75.5	76.0	+ 6.0	+3.0

Test Administered: Terra Nova

Table 2F

School F: Mean Grade Equivalents for Standardized Testing in Reading and Mathematics for Boys in Grades 6, 7, and 8

Class of 2000 [N=21]:

	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 6-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	6.7	8.3	9.0	2.3	1.2
Math	6.1	7.8	9.5	3.4	1.7

Class of 2001 [N=18]:

	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 6-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	6.6	8.4	8.7	2.1	1.1
Math	7.1	8.2	9.2	2.1	1.1

Class of 2002 [N=23]:

	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	Grade 6-8 Gain	Gain per year
Reading	6.1	7.5	8.3	2.2	1.1
Math	5.9	7.4	8.6	2.7	1.4

Test Administered: Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Table 3

Attendance Rates (in percent)

School A

Class	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade
2000	97.1	98.1	97.6	98.6
2001	97.7	95.7	97.6	97.4
2002	97.4	97.7	97.5	97.3

School B

Class	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade
2000	n/a	97.0	95.0	94.6
2001	95.6	96.9	96.8	96.8
2002	97.2	97.0	96.5	94.6

School C

Class	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade
2000	n/a	98.6	98.1	97.6
2001	n/a	98.1	97.5	97.8
2002	n/a	97.1	97.6	97.6

School D

Class	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade
2000	n/a	96.2	96.2	96.7
2001	97.0	95.6	94.7	95.5
2002	95.5	94.2	93.8	91.9

School E

Class	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade
2000	n/a	97.5	97.9	97.8
2001	n/a	97.4	98.1	98.0
2002	n/a	99.1 (n=8)	98.1	97.2

Table 3 (continued)

Attendance Rates (in percent)

School F

Class	5th Grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade
2000	n/a	97.7	97.3	97.8
2001	n/a	97.7	98.5	97.4
2002	n/a	97.8	97.4	97.2

Table 4

First-Order Correlations: Relationships Between Principals' Ratings and Students' School Grades and Absences (N=260)

Ratings	8th-Grade Final Report Card Grades			
	Math	Language Arts	Science	Days Absent (8th Grade)
Level of academic effort	.16**	.16**	.16**	-.17**
Demonstrates leadership	.25***	.24***	.25***	-.19**
Level of social maturity	.25***	.23***	.24***	-.14*
Commitment of parents to student's education	.32***	.31***	.31***	-.27***

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

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